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What's a Slum?

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When I was about thirteen-years-old I chanced upon an article in Henry Luce's *Life* magazine that described East Harlem (a Manhattan working class neighborhood) as "a slum inhabited by beggar-poor Italians, Negroes, and Puerto Ricans," words that stung me and wedged in my memory.

"We live in a slum," I mournfully reported to my father. "What's a slum?" he asked. He was not familiar with the term. "It's a neighborhood where everybody is poor and the streets are all run-down and dumpy and dirty and filled with beggars." "Shut up and show respect for your home," he replied. Note his choice of words. Poppa was not expressing pride in East Harlem as such. But situated within the neighborhood was our *home*, and you didn't want anything reflecting poorly upon family and home.

On my block, 118th Street, there was both *normal* poverty and *extreme* poverty. But the latter was not readily detectable. For years there was an iceman on the block who did a bustling business. This meant that there were families that did not have refrigerators--including my own. We made do with a window box that held a piece of ice and a bottle of milk and a few other perishables. Eventually we got a second-hand refrigerator.

Also on 118th Street was an old brownstone that served as a nursery for needy children. One day during my high-school years, I heard the famous writer Dorothy Parker being interviewed on the radio. (I was already familiar with her name if not her writing.) She was talking about giving aid to the poor children who were cared for in that very same settlement house on 118th Street. "Are they Negro children?" asked the interviewer. "No, I believe they are Italians," Dorothy Parker answered. The nursery for the needy was just across the street halfway down the block from my house. I often hung around that area yet I had never seen impoverished children being escorted in or out of there; or I never thought anything of it if I had seen any.

Italian Harlem had its block parties, family links, and numerous face-to-face acquaintances. Still it was not one big *Gemeinschaft* (community). It was not an urban village. Many people

were unknown to each other even on the same block, even in adjacent buildings. I had to find out about the nursery-for-the-needy from a radio interview with Dorothy Parker. That is almost pure *Gesellschaft* (impersonal mass society).

Contrary to the slur in *Life* magazine, I came to realize that, despite the extreme poverty, my neighborhood was inhabited not by "beggar-poor" derelicts but mostly by hardworking and usually underpaid proletarians, more-or-less sane folks who were the ordinary heroes of the urban landscape. Much the same can be said for the nearby African-American and Puerto Rican communities in Harlem.

In Italian Harlem (as East Harlem was also called) there could be found people who drove the trucks, taxicabs, trolleys, and buses. They manned the loading docks and the maintenance crews, and practically monopolized New York's building sites as construction workers, carpenters, bricklayers, electricians, roofers, glaziers, housepainters, and plumbers. And when they were not building structures, they were on the wrecking crews that tore them down.

Other Italian Americans put in long hours employed in candy stores, grocery stores, and five-and-dime stores, in dress shops, barber shops, butcher shops, and sweatshops; in beauty parlors, ice cream parlors, and pizza parlors; tending bakeries, barrooms, and poolrooms. They were bank clerks, janitors, dry cleaners, and laundresses. They were auto mechanics, machinists, manicurists, hospital workers, and gardeners; ditch diggers and gravediggers, milkmen and mailmen, shoemakers and homemakers, elevator operators and telephone operators, apartment guards and bank guards, night workers and day jobbers. They shined shoes at Grand Central Station right next to their Black coworkers, and on the Staten Island ferry. And they buffed the shiny lobbies of midtown office buildings.

They served as waiters and waitresses, cooks and caterers; secretaries and receptionists; garment cutters, tailors, seamstresses, and dress designers; fish vendors, vegetable vendors, peddlers, and truck farmers.

They worked in insurance offices and post offices. They built the highest skyscrapers and deepest subway tunnels, and years later their offspring cleaned the subway tracks and the streets and sidewalks of the whole city and collected the garbage, holding the lion's share of jobs in the Sanitation Department.

These were the people who performed "the work of civilization" to borrow a phrase from the great economist Thorstein Veblen. (Veblen was actually talking about the unsung unpaid work that *women* did all over the world.) The working poor lived out their lives largely unsung and unnoticed. Wherever they toiled, it was almost always to "bring some money home for the family," that prime unit of survival.

Tucked away amidst the blue collar ranks of Italian Harlem were the politicos who got out the vote in their neighborhood precincts for the Democratic Party. There were local lawyers and realtors; doctors, dentists, and morticians; professional musicians and many amateur ones, and photographers (mostly for weddings and Holy Confirmations); a few young toughs training to be professional boxers who might end up as downtown bouncers if they were lucky; some union shop stewards and union organizers, a struggling magazine illustrator, a comic book cartoonist, a sculptor, a tall lovely sixteen year-old girl who was working as a model

downtown, young men attending City College and young women attending Hunter College, and a few aspiring opera students, including a lovely mezzo-soprano who performed with great charm at local events and at high mass at Holy Rosary Church. Then there was an occasional young man going off to the seminary to become a priest, or a young woman preparing to become a nun.

In sum, *pace* Henry Luce and *Life* magazine, defamatory labels like "slum" and "beggar poor" can hide a multitude of virtues--not likely to be appreciated by Mr. Luce and his super rich cohorts.

There is the saying that "the slums are not the problem, they are the solution," meaning they are the place we dump the marginal and low performing groups. It might do well to remember that the slums are where hard-working underpaid people live and out from which they venture to help keep society afloat.

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Michael Parenti is an award winning, internationally known author. His two most recent books are ***The Face of Imperialism*** (2011), and ***Waiting for Yesterday: Pages from a Street Kid's Life*** (2013), from which this article is excerpted.

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